THE HUMAN FACE OF GOD

December 20, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 2:1-7

"And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger,..." --Luke 2:7(RSV)

I would like to introduce you to one of my favorite pieces of Christmas literature. I took a chance last week by bringing Barbara Robinson's The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, into the pulpit. My only fear was that you might wonder about the general level of the literature in the Buchanan household, if not our taste.

This week, it's How The Grinch Stole Christmas, by Dr. Seuss.

Now, if you have ever had the privilege of reading a Dr. Seuss book to a child, you already know about the delight of hearing his wonderful, almost irresistible rhythms and rhymes.

You may also have discovered the secret, which I have discovered and which has made me into a devotee of Dr. Seuss, namely that the stories are not only fun to read, they are about important ideas.

How The Grinch Stole Christmas is about a grouchy creature who hates Christmas. He lives up on a mountain overlooking Who-ville. The people who live in Who-ville are called Whos.

The Grinch has endured Christmas for decades -

"The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!
Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason.
It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right.
It could be perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.
But I think that the most likely reason of all
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small."

So he decided to do something about it.

In Who-ville, Christmas was celebrated with great enthusiasm...

- with a mountain of toys and treats in each house,
- with a great feast which all the Whos attended,
- and, after the feast, by singing, in which all the Whos join, holding hands.

The Grinch liked that least of all.

So down he came on Christmas Eve, and climbed down every chimney, and stole all the presents - toys - treat - decorations - trees, stuffed all of it back up each chimney, and, at the end, reached down and took even the Christmas log from each fireplace.

He took it up to his mountain and just as he was about to dump it over the other side, he heard a sound from the valley. It must be the Whos discovering that Christmas had been stolen.

"'That's a noise,' grinned the Grinch,
'That I simply must hear!'
So he paused. And the Grinch put his hand to his ear.
And he did hear a sound rising over the snow.
It started in low. Then it started to grow..."

It was singing.

"Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming!
It came!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!
And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: 'How could it be so?
It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
It came without packages, boxes or bags!'
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
'Maybe Christmas,' he thought, 'doesn't come from a store.
Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit more!'"

So - he brought Christmas back and everyone had a fine time, including the Grinch.

What always occurs to me when I read that is that Dr. Seuss's Grinch isn't the first. In fact, one of the troubling enigmas of history is that, in the name of religion, Christmas has been abolished on more than one occasion.

In the year 1659 the Magistrates of Massachusetts passed an ordinance which abolished Christmas. The ordinance read:

"Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas, either by fasting, forbearing labor, or any other way - every such person so offending shall pay for each offense five shillings as a fine to the country." [Conrad Hyers, And God Created Laughter, p. 53]

A century before the Massachusetts ordinance, celebrating Christmas was an offense punishable by imprisonment in John Calvin's Geneva. In 1647 the British Parliament abolished Christmas as a public and religious holiday and penalties were imposed for its observance. William Bradford,

in his famous Pilgrim Journal, stated with pride that "on the day called Christmas all were summoned to labor as usual"; and also with pride, that he treated with patience and forgiveness those who had lapsed into paganism by celebrating instead of working. And just a little more than a century ago a New York school teacher "wrote that it was school as usual in New York on December 25. When she asked if any knew what day it was, not a one realized that it was Christmas Day." ["The Triumph of Christmas," Clifford Edwards, Virginia Commonwealth Magazine, Winter 1977]

Why, do you suppose John Calvin and William Bradford and the Puritan preachers, and others, were so opposed to the celebration of Christmas?

The traditional answer is that from very early times Christmas has had a shady relationship with paganism. It started out after all, in the Roman Empire, as a kind of cultural alternative for the Christians. On December 25 the Roman Empire celebrated the birthday of Mithras, the Invincible Sun, a few days after the Winter Solstice. It was a real Roman party. It was tempting to join in, so the Christians decided to appropriate the date to celebrate the miracle of the incarnation and the birth of Jesus. Because the Winter Solstice has always been an event of enormous mystery and therefore religious attention, the Christian "Christ-Mass" happening at the same time, often borrowed some of the symbols. The wreath, the evergreen tree, mistletoe, are borrowed outright from an ancient spirituality which focused on life, fertility and the turning of the sun back toward the northern hemisphere. When we have thought about it, Christians have always been nervous about the pagan potential of our feast - a topic anyone who lives on Michigan Avenue in December knows all about.

Now, it is not fashionable to defend Puritanism and poor John Calvin has become almost a euphemism for repressive, tight-lipped joyless piety. May I suggest that the dismissal of this position as a product of joyless religion is an oversimplification? We owe them more than that. And while in many ways they do seem joyless to us and probably were, their point in being suspicious of Christmas was that the claim of Christmas is so radical, so unlikely, that it is actually quite fragile and susceptible to being overwhelmed and lost in the midst of the merry-making.

I'd very much like to have it both ways: the merry-making and the theological integrity. In fact we need both. And the point of this sermon is that the merry-making is even more merry when you preserve the integrity of the theology; but I'd like also to concede the point. It is a little difficult to discern the point of it all if the only evidence you have is the sidewalk quartet blaring "Jingle Bells" and "Winter Wonderland," over and over again, without ceasing, without interruption - until shoppers (and certainly people who live here) want to beg for mercy.

The point is - that the point gets lost.

In his wonderful autobiography, David Read, pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, tells about an incident which happened to him when, as a divinity student, he was traveling in the Near East, in 1935.

"One day I was walking alone on the Mount of Olives when a young Arab walked past me. He was about thirty years old, and dressed in flowing robes; he had flashing eyes and a dignified walk. Suddenly a thought struck me, 'Someone who looked like that walked on this hillside, and we claim that he was no other than the unique Son of God, the Savior of the World. Is it really possible?' In a moment I realized that all the miracle stories of the Bible are really incidental and unimportant compared to the stupendous assertion that God himself walked this earth as such a man. I thought how carelessly we sing our Christmas carols - 'Veiled in the flesh the Godhead see!'... If I really believed that, other doubts and questions mattered very little." [This Grace Given, p. 77,78]

The Christian claim of Christmas is enormous. What child is this? This child is God among us. This birth is the coming of God into the world. This nativity is our salvation. And in defense of those crusty old Puritans and John Calvin, they were sure that their claim would get lost in all the hoopla about the sun returning and the fertility of the earth. And it would seem to me, that at the very least, we owe them a hearing.

But, I would submit, there is another reason. That basic, enormous Christian claim, that the infant was God's Christ, is not only fragile but discomforting, disturbing, maybe even offensive. There's a bit of scandal here. If God is in that baby, God is suddenly vulnerable, weak, humble. If the life of that First Century Palestinian Jew represents the eternity and majesty and power of God - we've got some rethinking to do. If that baby in a manger, that strange, young man, that crucified troublemaker, is somebody's idea of a Supreme Being, all of the traditional religious thinking in history is overturned.

It is the claim, after all, that got him in consistent trouble. Because of that claim, King Herod went berserk and slaughtered the innocents. Jesus the man wasn't hounded to his death by religious zealots because he taught wrong doctrine. He was crucified because of this blasphemous claim that he was God's Messiah, God's Anointed Son, the enfleshing of God.

It is so very much simpler to think about God in traditional, classic terms... Namely - a God up there somewhere, remote, awesome, ensconced in the heavens - preferably on a throne - detached, like the gods of the Greeks and Romans, occupied with their own affairs, essentially unaffected by the human conditions. A heavenly soap opera...

Or perhaps God as a judge, stern, angry... On a television talk show a group of American teen-agers were asked about their ideas of God. This is what they came up with: an angry, vengeful judge...

Or, for the intellectuals, - God as abstraction: the first cause, the ground of all being, the spirit that animates the universe. It was Karl Barth who observed that "when we pronounce or hear the word 'God' we think of the highest, the deepest, the absolute, the ultimate force... We are in constant temptation to think of some abstraction." [Deliverance to the Captives, p. 111]

"The Force Be With You," Hollywood suggested to us, and we took it up because it fits.

The basic Christian claim is that the word "God" is defined best not by philosophic speculation, and not by sentimental piety and not even by reflections on the goodness of nature... All those are important and good. But the basic Christian claim is that the word "God" is defined by the life of the man Jesus. The enormous Christian claim is that the Bethlehem birth is much more than a warm and wonderful human story. It is that, to be sure. But it is also, we believe, much more. It is God entering time and space and history. It is God becoming human.

In his recent book, which compares Christianity with the great religions of the world, Hans Kung writes -

"By 'God' the Bible means an authentic partner. Where others only heard an endless silence, the Scriptures tell of a people being addressed and claimed by its God. Where others experienced unchanging space and the void, this people was allowed to discover that the absolute can be heard and spoken to." [Christianity And The World Religions, p. 398]

Our God, Kung writes, is "God with a human face." [On Being a Christian, p. 308]

The trouble with that radical claim - that God has become one of us, has entered humanity - besides its radicalness, is that we seem at times to be embarrassed by and to despise our humanity. We seem to want to believe that we need to be saved from our humanity - that we can't be human and spiritual - that words like "sex" and pregnant" don't belong in church. A recent survey discovered that 80% of the American people don't like their own bodies. There is an industry built on that dislike. We are obsessively running, pounding, exercising, rearranging our bodies and always, always, losing weight. Certainly our culture encourages us to resist the universal physical transition of life, to disguise the reality of our aging... of our humanness. When the Christian Gospel affirms that the "Word was made flesh," our first and basic theological problem is that we don't like our own flesh.

One of the great Christian thinkers of the last century, Adolph Harnack, put it this way: "It is by self-conquest that a man is freed from the tyranny of matter." ["What is Christianity?" cited by J.S. Mogabqab, Weavings, Nov./Dec. 1987, p. 150]

Well, the Gospel of Christ asserts that matter, the world, the flesh, our humanness - are what God loves so much he entered it. God was "pleased with us to dwell." We are part of God's good creation. Our humanity, in God's judgment - is good enough to bear the Son.

The human face of God means that in the midst of our most human needs - when we are most human - we can count on God's presence. God is not apathetic and detached. God knows what it feels like to be you, to put it as personally as possible. God enters the interior of your life. God knows and understands your deepest emotions. You don't have to hide them

from God. God knows them. And because God walked among us in the life of Jesus, God has experienced those same emotions...

And that, I would propose to you, is the most staggering idea of all! It is what we Christians do not wish to lose at Christmas. And I would propose to you it is very good news, indeed.

Are you anxious, worried?

God knows about that.

Are you lonely?

God knows about that.

Are you ambitious, dissatisfied with the status quo?
Do you love someone more profoundly than you can describe?
Are you afraid of the future, afraid of dying?

God knows about all of that.

What this birth story means and proclaims and celebrates is that there is nothing you can feel: your deepest grief, your strongest love, your joy... that God has not experienced. And there is nowhere you can go, no aloneness, no "valley of the shadow of death," - where God has not been there ahead of you.

Sometime ago the Christian Century ran a remarkable article by a young woman who had lost her husband. She wrote:

"Some say 'This first Christmas without your husband will be hard for you.' Probably it will be, but without Christmas, life would be impossible."

We have trouble with the humanity of Jesus and the vulnerability of God. And it may be that it is because we are uncertain of our own humanity. But think of what it says about our humanity. Ponder it from another direction, Given an infinite variety of alternatives, God chose to save the world by becoming one of us. Think of what that says about us.

Again, Professor Kung adds a very helpful insight. Comparing Christianity with Buddhism, which he appreciates and from which we could learn a lot, he writes: "In being addressed by this God 'Thou' human beings can experience their own 'I' as raised to a dignity that is hardly ever seen in the East, and that no Western secular humanism, no technological progress, and no cosmic piety can guarantee." [op. cit., Kung, Christianity And The World Religions, p. 398]

God has made us into a "Thou" by speaking to us: has made us responsible by forcing the issues and requiring us to respond to him. In the birth of Bethlehem, we have become more than we ever expected.

You and I have new dignity because of that baby's birth. When we stand in awe before a manger, we stand a little taller.

We really could do it...

We really could become peacemakers. At his manger bed, something comes over us... We really could become the shapers and molders and creators of a new world. We really could make justice. We really could love this world passionately enough to preserve it and hand it on fresh, clean, pure, safe to our children.

Standing there in silence before this child we know that we really could change and become all that God has created us to be...

We really could stop self-destructive behavior. We really could stop self-deception, the addiction, the selfishness...

Standing at the manger, something comes over us and we know we have it in us to become new creatures.

One of the treats of the season this year for me was to discover one of the oldest existent Christian sermons - preached on Christmas morning by John Chrysostom in the Fourth Century. St. John Chrysostom was perhaps the greatest orator in the early church. He was the Patriarch of the Church in Constantinople. He said:

"And how shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of Days has become an infant. He who sits upon the sublime and heavenly throne, now lies in a manger.

"For this He has assumed my body, that I may become capable of His word; taking my flesh, He gives me his spirit.

"Come, then, let us observe the Feast."

So, let us come to the feast.

It is a feast of life; life made holy because of the birth.

It is a feast of unspeakable joy, because God has shown a human face.

It is a feast of enormous hope because in the birth of Jesus, our humanity is loved and blessed and made new. "What child is this, who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping? This, this, is Christ the King." Amen.